

Acts

Acts 4:1-22 - There will be opposition

In **Acts Chapter 3** we got a glimpse - in the miraculous healing of a helpless cripple - into what we can expect from the Holy Spirit in making visible witness to the healing, restoring power of the living Jesus in this new era of his continuing ministry.

In **Acts Chapter 4** we then get our first glimpse into people reacting very negatively to this witness to Jesus. So right from the start there is **opposition**, which is surprising, because why would anybody in their right mind resist clear evidence of a miraculous healing?

The Holy Spirit tells us why in **verse 2**; it's "because the apostles were **proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.**" This was the issue that had "greatly disturbed" the temple administrators and religious leaders in **verses 1 and 2**, and why they'd rudely interrupted Peter and John as they were teaching and thrown them into a jail cell (verse 3).

But why should resurrection have been such a sticking point for the religious leaders, when the Jews of that day knew from their Scriptures that there was life beyond death? Several people in the Old Testament had been brought back to life after they'd died - the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:17-24), the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:18-37), and a dead man had sprung back to life again for simply touching Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:20-21). And during Jesus' earlier ministry he'd resurrected several people too - the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17), the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:52-56), and Lazarus of Bethany (John 11). And when Jesus died "tombs broke open" and "the bodies of many holy people....were raised to life....and went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Matthew 27:50-53).

So the resurrection of dead people wasn't shocking, because several people had been resurrected back to life already, and with witnesses too. So what was the real cause of the religious leaders' upset? It was "**proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.**" That was the issue. And it's no wonder they were concerned, because "many who heard the message (about Jesus) believed," **verse 4**, "and the number of men grew to about 5,000." So, "to stop this from spreading any further among the people," **verse 17**, "we (religious leaders) must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone **in this name.**"

And there's our first clue from the Holy Spirit as to why there was and would be such emotional and illogical resistance to the Christian message: it is the claim by Christians that Jesus is the real thing, that **everything he claimed himself to be is true**. So when Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life" and "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" in **John 11:25**, that was true. And to claim he was the Messiah sent by God as the only one assigned to and capable of resurrecting us humans from the dead - that was also true. "Because I live, you shall live also," Jesus said (in John 14:19), so in truth it's only because of Jesus that resurrection to new life is possible.

Resurrection from the dead to new life, therefore, is sewn up in **this one man by the name of Jesus**. It is not, as Mary and most of her fellow Jews believed, in a general "resurrection at the last day," **John 11:24**, when resurrected bodies would be united with souls to live forever as God originally intended. Christianity, therefore, not only clashed with the typical Jewish belief on resurrection, it also clashes with anyone who does not accept that **Jesus himself is the one and only source of resurrection**.

So how come nearly five thousand Jews accepted that in **Acts 4:4**?

Well, back in **Acts 2:39** Peter had talked about a "promise," that God would "call" people and gift them with the Holy Spirit, and here was visible witness to that promise coming true - because what that calling and promise had visibly produced in these 5,000 Jews was total acceptance of the apostles' saying Jesus had been raised from the dead (**Acts 2:32**). And that, in turn, had enabled them to accept as totally true what Jesus had said about himself being the only source of resurrection to eternal life in **John 11:25**. And then, when they'd seen with their own eyes the miraculous healing of the cripple at simply the mention of Jesus' name, they were totally convinced that Jesus was alive and continuing his ministry of healing and restoring people to new life, just as he'd been doing before.

And believing that made them into visible witnesses to Jesus, just as the gift of the Holy Spirit makes us into witnesses to Jesus, because if anyone asks us, "**Why are you a Christian?**" - it's for the same reasons those 5,000 Jews became Christians: our eyes - just like their eyes - were opened to the apostles' eye-witness proof of Jesus' resurrection, which in turn proved what Jesus said about himself being the resurrection and the life was true, backed up in turn by the healing of the cripple in Jesus' name that clearly demonstrated and gave visible witness to Jesus' ministry of healing and raising us to new life being real. And that's why I'm a Christian, because, thanks to the Holy Spirit, I see all those things too.

So, when Peter later says, “Be ready with an answer for the hope you have in you,” I have my answer right here in Acts 2, 3 and 4 as to why I have hope: it’s because I believe what those five thousand Jews believed: that Jesus was resurrected, giving me realistic and justifiable hope that he truly is alive and on the job healing and raising me and many others to new life, to make us visible witnesses to Jesus truly being the resurrection and the life.

But how do we explain why some people, faced with exactly the **same** obvious proof that Jesus is alive and on the job healing and raising people to new life, **do not accept it**? Well, the next few verses, from verses 13 to 22, answer that question.

Notice first, that these people in opposition knew something really dramatic had happened, because back in **verses 5-7** the high priest and his family and all “the rulers, elders and teachers of the law” hurried a meeting on the very “next day” to interrogate Peter and John, starting with the question: “By what power or what name did you do this (healing of the cripple)?”

It was the dream question for giving witness to Jesus, and Peter - “filled with the Holy Spirit” - launches in with relish in **verses 9-11**. “If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and we’re being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and everyone else in Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you completely healed.” And then, quoting Psalm 118:22, Peter nails them with: Yes, Jesus was that “cornerstone you builders rejected,” just as Scripture had predicted.

What had happened to the cripple, therefore, could be easily explained in the scriptures these Jewish leaders were supposed to be experts in, but they’d not only rejected Jesus as the healing, restoring Messiah, they’d also killed him. So how embarrassing was that for them? And especially when Peter then said, “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,” **verse 12**.

And by “saved” Peter meant saved from death, because it was “resurrection of the dead” (verse 2) that he and John were in trouble over. These religious leaders, then, had actually killed **the only solution to the problem of death**. The purpose of all their religious rules and rituals totally collapsed, therefore, because what was the point of them if they had no provable solution to death anymore? And if there was “no **other** name” by which people could be saved from death, now what? In one fell swoop the religious leaders had their credibility, and their authority, and their pious superiority, shot to pieces.

And human pride doesn't take kindly to that at all, as we see in **verse 13**, when these respected teachers of the law also realized with astonishment that Peter and John were "unschooled, ordinary men," but "being with Jesus" had given them such amazing "courage" and confidence.

It was visible witness yet again to Jesus, just like the healing of the cripple, who just happened to be "standing there" with Peter and John too. What a dilemma this created for these religious leaders, therefore, because such undeniable evidence of a miraculous healing demanded a response, but "there was nothing they could say," **verse 14**.

So in **verse 15** they dismiss Peter and John for a chat among themselves: "What (on earth) are we going to do with these men?" they wondered in **verse 16** - especially when "Everybody in Jerusalem knows they've done an outstanding miracle, and **we cannot deny it.**" Their only solution, **verse 18**, was to "command Peter and John not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." No decent, logical reason given; just a pompous threat.

Well, Peter wasn't intimidated one bit by that, because he immediately answers back in **verses 19-20**: "You can judge it right in God's sight if we obey you rather than him if you like, but we have no choice but to speak out about what we've seen and heard." And the religious leaders had no answer to that either, except more threats, **verse 21** - but not too harsh in their threats, "because all the people were praising God for what had happened."

So very soon in Acts the Holy Spirit is showing us there will be opposition, and completely unreasonable opposition too. Even undeniable evidence will be denied. And the usual weapon resorted to will be threats of punishment; but even then the Holy Spirit opens up opportunity for visible witness to Jesus.

And on that point, I love the comment by one man in answer to how he felt facing serious persecution and a real threat to his life if he continued teaching that Jesus was the only solution to death, and the only one capable of healing and restoring broken lives. His answer was priceless: "Persecution? Hey, **bring it on**, because isn't that our calling as Christians, to be a witness to Jesus in whatever circumstances we're in?" It was the same courage and confidence Peter and John had here in Acts 4.

So we can expect the Holy Spirit to give us the same courage and confidence too when we're up against people who won't accept the evidence in Scripture or in our own lives either, that Jesus has been truly raised to life to heal and restore our broken human lives, and one day raise us to eternal life too - because he is the only one who can.